

Prologue



WINGS OF MADNESS

*Today I felt pass over me
A breath of wind from the wings of madness.*

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Jake didn't see her until it was too late.

A woman disguised as a bundle of rags bolted out of the Park View Pet Shop and directly into his path, nearly knocking him to the icy sidewalk. Instead, she was the one who landed there in an awkward heap, her face crimson, her eyes averted.

He bent toward her, shielding her from the bitter January wind. "Ma'am, are you okay? I'm sorry I—"

She looked up at him, and the words froze on his lips.

Lord, help me. He was face to face with a madwoman.

Wide, unfocused eyes lit by an unseen fire stared blankly back at him. Dark smudges down her cheeks—dirt? makeup? dried blood?—seemed days in the making. Her black hair was matted against her head, and her prominent nose ran unchecked.

Jake yanked out a clean handkerchief and knelt by her side, lowering his voice as though speaking to a child. "Let me help you get up."

She shrank back from him, a bony hand tightening around a threadbare striped scarf. The woman might have been his mother's age, in her midforties. He studied the lines around her mouth. *No, older.* The sad wildness in her eyes hinted at decades of pain.

When she dropped her chin and mumbled an incoherent word or two, he leaned closer. Maybe she would mention her name, where she lived, something.

Except what she said made no sense at all...



Maybe you're thinking the same thing: *This makes no sense at all! I thought this was a book about Mary Magdalene, one of the Bad Girls of the Bible.*

Oh, it is, dearie. You've come to the right place. No bait-and-switch here.

I simply asked myself the question, "What if Mary Magdalene walked among us today?" That's the *Story* part. Before doing that, I immersed myself in the biblical accounts of her life. That's the *Study* part. In the process, I discovered a very different woman than I'd expected. Although "her name has come to us laden with infamy,"¹ most of us don't know what she's famous—or infamous—for doing.

Clearly she must have done *something*. Of the seven Marys in the Bible,² Mary of Magdala is mentioned *fourteen times*, more than any other woman in the Gospels except Mary, the mother of Jesus.³

Hmm.

When I asked my Christian writing sisters what they remembered about Mary, most of 'em were convinced Mary Magdalene was a bona fide Bad Girl.

"Wasn't she a prostitute? Worse than other sinners?" *Sue*

"A good heart for Christ but a bad reputation." *Jan*

"She had a lot of hard knocks and made some bad choices."

Janet

"She was definitely a bad girl...the proverbial 'tender-hearted whore.'" *Karen*

"I'm confused. Was she the woman who washed Christ's feet? An adulteress? A murderer?" *Debbie*

Yes, there's *something* about Mary. We just can't figure out what it is.

"I don't know if she would be classified as 'bad' per se, or simply afflicted with a terrible case of PMS." *Carolyn*

Hey, that's it! Blame the hormones. Works for me, babe.

"Not necessarily bad, but she must have opened the door to those demons..." *Angela*

Uh...*demons*? Nobody ever talks about *that* part of her life. Except the apostles.

When Jesus rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, out of whom he had driven seven demons. *Mark 16:9*

Wait a minute. The woman was a *demoniac*? Of all the people he might have appeared to first, Jesus chose a former...well, *madwoman*? Like that person who came tearing out of the pet shop a few minutes ago? Whoa.

Girlfriend, we gotta find out how Mary got rid of the demons in her life! And why Jesus trusted a woman with a devilish past to reveal his heavenly future...and ours. Contemporary story first, biblical study second, let's explore what it means to be utterly, completely, amazingly *transformed*.

Darkness to light, death to life.

Chapter One



DARKNESS AGAIN AND A SILENCE

*Only a look and a voice;
then darkness again and a silence.*

HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

“Luna,” she whispered.

Jake leaned closer and nodded, wanting to encourage this stranger sprawled on the sidewalk before him, hoping his face didn’t mirror her confusion nor broadcast his.

Luna?

When she said it again, he heard the muffled tinkle of a tiny bell. She stuffed her other hand into her pocket, but not before he caught a glimpse of something bright and soft, like a child’s toy, still in its plastic packaging. His gaze followed hers, trained on the shop door behind them. *Ah. A pet toy maybe.* Was Luna the name of her cat?

Jake turned back toward her and smiled, then slipped his arm underneath hers, gently easing her to her feet. “So, is that a treat for Luna?”

She shoved the object deeper inside her coat, a wary expression crossing her troubled features. Whoever—or whatever—Luna was, Jake felt certain the package in the woman’s pocket wasn’t paid for. Hadn’t she come out of the pet shop in a mad dash?

Ignoring his offered handkerchief, the stranger wiped her nose on her scarf. She backed up as she did so, clearly eager to move on.

Jake eyed the busy flow of traffic on Clark Street. It was past five, nearly dark. Letting her stumble across the intersection on her own would be risky. Her too-big gray coat might camouflage her presence in the fading twilight.

Maybe that's the whole idea, Jake.

Three years of starting churches in urban neighborhoods had taught him something about dealing with street people and others on the edge. This woman was definitely edgy. He inclined his knitted ski cap toward the pavement. "Pretty slippery tonight. Can I help you get somewhere?"

She shook her head, then turned and stumbled forward, her mismatched boots shuffling along the snow-banked sidewalk, heading north toward Tower Records. He caught up with her in two steps, being careful to give her some elbowroom, and shortened his long stride to match her halting one.

"I'm Pastor Jake Stauros from Calvary Fellowship." Did she flinch at that, or was it simply the darkening skies obscuring his vision? Undaunted, he slipped a business card out of his pocket and pressed it into her hand. "Our church is right up the street across from Reebie Storage." Not that Calvary looked anything like a church. The three-story brick eyesore had recently been resurrected, saved from the wrecker's ball after months of lobbying by its Lincoln Park neighbors. "Do you live around here? Sure would love to have you visit us this Sunday."

It was an invitation he extended everywhere he went. Some folks took him up on it. Most didn't. "Church full of misfits," a visitor once grunted on his way out the door. Jake chuckled, a mental picture of his congregation coming into focus. The guy wasn't far off the mark. They *were* a ragtag bunch. Suzy with her two-tone orange hair. Bruce with his armful of tattoos. And four dozen more with their own stories to tell.

This woman and her Goodwill wardrobe would fit right in.

He watched her struggle to keep her footing on the icy walk as a fresh wave of compassion flooded his chest, stinging his eyes. *Father, protect her.* Broken and desperate, she was the kind of person he'd come to Chicago to help.

When they reached the 7-Eleven at Belden Avenue, she darted across the street without a word. Her shapeless gray form never hesitated, oblivious to the angry honks and rude gestures from drivers impatient to get home and gulp down dinner in time to catch the Bulls on TBS.

Jake waved at her, knowing she wouldn't see it. Maybe they'd get another chance to talk, another time. Fishing in his jeans pocket for change, he ducked in the corner store in search of a cold Dad's Root Beer and a bag of chips. It wasn't dinner, but it was close enough.

She hadn't meant to let him get that close.

Mary shivered under her moth-eaten coat, pausing long enough to watch him disappear through the door of the 7-Eleven before aiming her steps toward home.

To her right, a frozen fountain piled high with evergreens and twinkling lights served as a welcome signpost. Half a block more and she'd be hidden behind the thick walls of her brownstone, away from staring eyes and wagging tongues.

And preachers up to nothing but good.

What had he said his name was? *Jake something*. Too eager to help and not much to look at, that one.

Oh, and what are you, Mary Margaret Delaney?

Ugly as Medusa and scared spitless of him—that's what she was.

She kept her head down as she quickened her wobbly steps, squeezing the toy in her pocket to keep her spirits up. *Ha!* A grim smile moved across her chapped lips. The spirits were up, all right, rising with the not-yet-visible moon. Winter nights came too quickly and lasted too long, especially this one.

Mary could already sense the full moon tugging at the tattered strings of her soul, unraveling her mind, undoing her tenuous hold on reality. How many days would she lose this time? How many hours of blackness would swallow her whole?

Her turn-of-the-century townhouse loomed before her. Despite its peeling black trim and decaying mansard roof, it was a welcome sight. *Home*. She stumbled up the concrete steps, then shoved the key in the lock, hands

trembling. A minute later, both doors safely latched behind her, she took the first deep breath since her headlong collision with that homely young man, he of the gentle words and the sad brown eyes that saw entirely too much.

He knew she'd shoplifted the toy—that was obvious.

But he hadn't seen her bare arms. And he hadn't followed her home. So he didn't know the whole of it. He didn't know about Luna.

A furry tail flicked around the hem of her coat as a chorus of insistent meows echoed through the empty house. "Max!" she cooed, gathering up the striped feline at her feet, cradling it like a baby. One softly padded paw batted at her nose. "Mama brought something for you, boy-o." She lowered him to the worn hardwood floor, then tore off the plastic wrapping and presented the cat with the stolen treasure.

Within seconds Max was joined by an orange tabby, then a black tom with one white leg, each one pouncing in turn on the jingling toy mouse. "Good kitties," she murmured as more cats appeared from various corners of the house, their cries of hunger plaintive and scolding.

When she straightened, Mary caught a glimpse of herself in the antique hall mirror. The bitter taste of bile rose in the back of her throat. How had it come to this? She peered more closely at the stranger with the unfocused eyes and the filthy face. Had she slept somewhere other than her own bed last night? Were these her clothes or someone else's? Had she eaten today? yesterday?

Not remembering things—that was the worst part.

No, the scars. Those were the very worst.

Shedding her coat, she moved through the dimly lit house, noticing how much furniture there was and how it begged to be dusted. Boxes were crammed in corners, stacked in haphazard piles that threatened to topple with the slightest nudge. The rooms smelled stale and acrid, like too many cats and not enough litter boxes. Such a depressing place to call home. Even the kitchen offered a bleak welcome. Empty metal cupboards, a refrigerator without food, dirty dishes littering the sink.

Mary put a pan of water on the stove to boil, grateful to find a few neglected teabags in a chipped porcelain canister. She washed her face with

thawing fingers, then dropped into one of the straight-backed chairs that stood around her kitchen table like soldiers awaiting orders.

She had orders of her own to follow, barked by an unseen master. Orders she dare not ignore, even if she had the strength or the courage. Mary Margaret Delaney knew she had neither.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed up the sleeves of an unfamiliar black sweater, then stretched out her arms on the table's yellow Formica surface.

Yes. These were the worst.

She touched one ragged fingernail to each of the scarlet slashes, which stood out starkly against her pale skin. *Cut, cut, cut.* How evenly they were spaced, marching along her forearms. *Two. Three. Six. Seven.* Not deep enough to kill. Just enough to make her bleed, enough to make her weep, enough to make her long for the sweet release that death promised but never delivered.

Luna had been much braver than she.

Mary turned her arms, exposing her blue-veined wrists.

Luna had cut here.

“Cut me some slack, Pete.”

Jake tucked the telephone receiver between his shoulder and ear, managing to scrawl his signature on a letter with one hand and wave his secretary into the room with the other. Friday afternoons at Calvary Fellowship were never dull.

“Look, I’ll be ready in half an hour, okay? Yeah, yeah, Ranalli’s is fine.” Any pizza was fine with Jake, but Ranalli’s made the best in Lincoln Park. “You’ll call the other guys, right? Tell ’em I’m running late? Good. See ya.” He hung up and tossed his pen onto a stack of papers, letting out a noisy sigh.

“Another week in paradise, eh, boss?” His volunteer secretary, Suzy, propped herself in the doorway, one slim hip jutted out at a provocative angle. Habit, nothing more. He’d found her in such a pose—wearing a decidedly less conservative outfit—outside an adults-only store on North Halsted last summer.

Jake had known what she really needed that hot August afternoon.

So he'd shared his Father's forgiveness with her. Given her a whole new definition of love. Brought her to church and watched her blossom into the woman God created her to be.

Pure ministry. It didn't get any better than that.

Not long after she'd arrived, Jake discovered the truth about Suzy: Before she'd been forced to peddle her wares on Halsted, she'd worked as a first-rate secretary at one of the big firms on Van Buren. Her organizational skills were the best thing that had ever happened to Calvary Fellowship. Who cared if her hair was a color not found in nature? The woman was a godsend, plain and simple, working nine to three at a neighborhood bank, then offering her talents to the church for the rest of the afternoon—no charge.

"It's almost six," she informed him, tapping her watch. "Time for all good pastors to call it a day."

He couldn't resist a playful wink. "Don't you know the best ministry happens after the sun goes down?"

"Sez you." Suzy grinned back at him and pushed away from the door-frame. "Have fun with the fellas tonight. See ya Sunday."

Jake flapped one hand in farewell as the phone rang again. Propping his feet on the desk, he grabbed the receiver and leaned back in his chair, untangling the cord, preparing for a long conversation. It was, after all, Friday—a day when too-small paychecks, too-long happy hours, weekend custody visits, and a hundred other stressors pushed people toward the brink. Jake wanted to be there if they fell.

"Calvary Fellowship. Pastor Stauros speaking."

The caller was in tears.

"Take your time, ma'am. I'm not in any hurry." And he wasn't. Pizza could wait. Pain could not.

His gaze wandered to the first-floor window facing the alley, the glass as black as the night sky. The elders had recommended putting bars outside the windows, although Jake loathed such measures. What was the point of keeping people *out* of church when they were all working so hard to bring them *in*?